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The Mennonites

A Brief Guide to Information

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Prepared for the Historical Committees of the General Conference Mennonite Church, the Mennonite Church, and the Western District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church

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I. Anabaptist/Mennonite History

A. Sixteenth-Century Anabaptist Roots

The early sixteenth century in Western Europe was a time of great and sudden changes. Virtually every aspect of life—politics, economics, social relations, intellectual thought, technology, and religion—was significantly altered as European civilization began the shift from a predominantly medieval to a predominantly modern world view. All of these changes had a direct impact on the birth, growth, and development of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement.

Four primary groups of Anabaptists emerged in the sixteenth century. Although there were clear connections between the groups at various points, the differences are also striking.

The **Swiss Brethren** grew out of the reformation led by Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland. The radical followers of Zwingli parted company with him in late 1523 over the issue of the pace of the reformation. After early—and unsuccessful—efforts to reform the state church, the radicals espoused the concept of a free church. The conflict with the state church focused almost immediately on the issue of baptism of infants. Because infant baptism was the act that demonstrated the unification of church and state, it was, in fact, a civil as well as a religious ceremony. When the brethren rejected infant baptism, insisting instead on baptizing only those who freely chose to commit themselves to the discipline and fellowship of the body of believers, they affirmed in a new (and for that time very radical) way the separation of church and state. The first adult baptisms took place on 21 January 1525, when Conrad Grebel baptized George Blaurock in the home of Felix Mantz.

Opposition to the movement was intense and immediate. The brethren were mockingly called Anabaptists (meaning "rebaptizers"). The civil and religious authorities first sought to counter the vigorous and vociferous preaching of the Anabaptists with imprisonment and banishment. When these

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measures failed to quiet the radicals, the sentence of death was imposed. On 5 January 1527, Felix Mantz, an articulate, educated student of Hebrew, was drowned in the Limmat River in Zurich. Thousands of Anabaptists would suffer similar fates before the end of the century.

In February of 1527, Michael Sattler, a former Benedictine prior, wrote the first Anabaptist confession of faith at Schleitheim, a village on the border between Switzerland and Germany. The Schleitheim Confession contained seven articles dealing with (a) baptism of adults, (b) practice of church discipline as described by Jesus Christ in Matthew 18, (c) the nature of the Lord's Supper, (d) the need for rigid separation between the church and the world, (e) the calling of pastors, (f) the prohibition against Christians using the sword, and (g) the prohibition against Christians swearing oaths. Sattler himself was soon captured by Austrian au thorities. He was cruelly tortured and burned at the stake on 20 May 1527.

To escape persecution, some Swiss Anabaptists emigrated to South Germany and Moravia in the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century many found their way to France and Holland. Migration to North America began in 1707 and continued throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

If Swiss Anabaptism was born out of the Reformation, the roots of **South German and Austrian Anabaptism** go back to medieval German mysticism. The writings of Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, and the *Theologia Deutsch* helped give South German Anabaptism its unique character. In contrast to Swiss Anabaptism, here there was less legalism and more spiritualism; less focus on discipline and more emphasis on love; somewhat less emphasis on pacifism but more intense focus on suffering as redemptive. South German Anabaptists as a group were also more interested in eschatology than their Swiss counterparts.

Balthasar Hubmaier, Hans Denck, and Hans Hut were some of the most important early leaders among the South German Anabaptists. Hubmaier gave the

movement its most clearly articulated theology of baptism; Denck emphasized love as the core of the Gospel; Hut was an indefatigable missionary with a very strong eschatological orientation. The most lasting contribution to South German Anabaptism was very likely that of Pilgram Marpeck. An educated, politically active, wealthy civil engineer from Rattenberg, Marpeck forsook all this when he joined the Anabaptist movement in Strassburg in 1528. He spent the rest of his life shepherding the struggling South German Anabaptist congregations. He died peacefully in 1556.

The roots of **Moravian Anabaptism** are clearly traceable both to Swiss and South German Anabaptism. Because of the greater toleration in Moravia, Anabaptists from all over Europe flocked eastward. Here they found a distinctive Anabaptism with a pronounced commitment to a communitarian lifestyle. The best-known leader of the Moravian Anabaptists was a hat maker from the Tyrol named Jakob Hutter. Though Hutter actually spent relatively little time in Moravia, his influence was so strong that most of the communitarian, Moravian Anabaptists became known as Hutterites. After migrating to Transylvania and Russia, the Hutterites came to North America in the 1870s, settling in North and South Dakota, Alberta, and Manitoba.

The story of **Dutch Anabaptism** is unique in many ways. Nowhere else in Europe was the movement as large. It has been estimated that at certain times in the sixteenth century up to twenty-five per cent of the populace in the northern Netherlands may have been Anabaptist. Nowhere else in Europe was Anabaptism the first organized manifestation of the Protestant break with the Roman Catholic Church (generally the Reformation went through a Lutheran or Reformed phase before Anabaptism gained a foothold); nowhere else in Europe was there such a marked split in the character of the movement.

The sudden shift from Roman Catholicism directly to Anabaptism was made possible at least in part by the strength of the Sacramentarian movement in the Netherlands. The Sacramentarians were those who

doubted the Roman Catholic doctrine that the body and blood of Jesus Christ were truly present in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The movement was widespread and provided fertile soil for Anabaptism.

Anabaptism came to the Netherlands in 1530, when Melchior Hoffman, who had recently been rebaptized in Strassburg, visited Emden in East Friesland. He baptized several hundred adults, and the Anabaptist movement spread throughout the Netherlands. It soon manifested, however, some different and disturbing characteristics. Hoffman had been obsessed with apocalyptic and eschatological visions, and when he was imprisoned in Strassburg in 1533, one branch of the movement seized upon that eschatological vision with disastrous results.

Convinced that Christ's return was imminent, these Anabaptists took total control of the town of Münster in northwest Germany. There, in preparation for the expected return of Christ, they instituted a violent, polygamous, communitarian society. The "Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster" lasted for almost a year and a half before it fell. The fallen "Münsterites" were then executed with unspeakable cruelty.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of Münster on the Anabaptist movement. Secular and religious leaders assumed that the violence and anarchy of Münster were the natural result of Anabaptism unchecked, and they sought in every way to eradicate the movement. Throughout Europe the persecution against all Anabaptists, however peaceful, was greatly intensified. Before long, a movement which had begun with a group of vociferous urban radicals instead consisted of "*Die Stillen im Land*" (the quiet in the land).

Historians were no more discriminating than the rulers of Europe. For centuries they too assumed that Münster was representative of all of Anabaptism. In fact, however, Münster was not even fully representative of Dutch Anabaptism, much less of European Anabaptism as a whole. From the very beginnings of Dutch Anabaptism, there had been a more peaceful wing. In 1537, Menno Simons, a priest-turned-Anabaptist, joined the pacifist Dutch

Anabaptists. He denounced the blasphemy of the Münsterites and exhorted the Anabaptists to follow faithfully the commands of Christ. Though he lived the rest of his life with a price on his head, he died peacefully in 1561. The movement would very likely have died without his leadership, so it is altogether fitting that the peaceful wing of the Dutch Anabaptists eventually took on his name: Mennonites, the followers of Menno Simons.

Due to persecution and proselytization, one could soon find Mennonites all across northern Europe. In the late eighteenth century, Mennonites in Prussia were invited by Catherine the Great of Russia to settle lands newly-won from the Turks in the Ukraine. In the 1870s thousands of these Mennonites left the steppes of Russia for the plains of central North America, but thousands stayed. After the chaos of World War I, suffering during the Russian Revolution and the Stalin era, and upheaval in World War II, there were additional emigrations of Mennonites from the Soviet Union (primarily to Canada and South America). The decline and fall of communism in the late 1980s saw further tens of thousands of Mennonites leave Russia for Germany.

Although there was considerable diversity in the intellectual origins of the various evangelical Anabaptist groups, their understanding of **Anabaptist theology** was remarkably consistent. They viewed the essential nature of the Christian faith in terms of the common elements of discipleship, non-resistance, and community.

The starting point for the evangelical Anabaptists was **discipleship**, *nachfolge Christi*, to "follow after Christ." Christianity, for them, was tested by one's behavior. They had no well-developed theology of salvation. If one walked as Christ had walked; if one kept His commandments, then one was saved. Conversely, if one did *not* so walk; if one did *not* keep His commandments, then one surely could not be saved, irrespective of whatever beliefs were claimed.

This understanding of discipleship implied a unique attitude toward the Bible. All of the Protestant reformers took the Bible seriously, but most of them

argued for a flat Bible—that all parts of the Bible were equally important for the Christian. The Anabaptists, in contrast, argued for a non-flat Bible, claiming that the New Testament (that part of the Bible that most directly reveals Christ's commands) was more important to those who claimed to be followers of Christ. Moreover, they espoused "the principle of the harder reading," refusing to soften even the hardest demands of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount.

This concept of discipleship and view of scripture led the evangelical Anabaptists to the practice of **non-resistance**. At least for the most radical of the Anabaptists, this meant the absolute refusal to bear arms, to hold political office, to swear an oath of loyalty to the state, or to sue in courts of law. Such convictions resulted in intense suffering (the more so given the fact that the Moslem Turks were threatening to invade Europe in the late 1520s), but the Anabaptists saw such suffering as evidence of their discipleship. After all, Christ too had suffered.

The third key element in the Anabaptist understanding of the Christian faith was the necessity of **community**. The Anabaptists clearly saw themselves as a righteous remnant, a people set apart from the world. They denied absolutely the role of the state in the church, rightly assuming that any such role involved coercion. In contrast, they insisted that adults freely consent to join the redeemed community. The rite of baptism was reserved for adults on scriptural grounds, but also because only adults could choose freely. Furthermore, only adults could voluntarily submit themselves to the discipline of the community as outlined in Matthew 18: 15-20. The Anabaptists understood that not all Christians would interpret Christ's commands in the same way, and the commitment to subjecting one's actions and interpretations to review by the discerning community provided a needed—but not always successful—corrective. This commitment to community carried economic as well as spiritual implications. From the very beginnings in Zurich in 1525, mutual aid was a central feature of Anabaptist

church practice. Its most extreme manifestation, of course, was among the Anabaptists of Moravia, but the concept was present everywhere. Commitment to the community clearly implied the willingness to sacrifice all one's possessions on its behalf.

B. Mennonites Today

The unique historical roots of the contemporary Mennonite church are found in sixteenth-century Anabaptism, but Anabaptism certainly does not represent the only historical influence which has shaped that church. Given their strong ties to Germanic cultures in the past, Mennonites have been deeply influenced by German pietism. In America, the impact of revivalism and fundamentalism has left an indelible mark on some Mennonites; rationalism and liberalism have profoundly affected others. These influences have served to soften, somewhat, the unique aspects of Anabaptist theology. As a result, many contemporary Mennonites would be almost indistinguishable from mainline Protestants.

As indicated above, the first Anabaptists were tireless missionaries, but persecution drove them into quiet, ethnic enclaves. This pattern continued until the nineteenth century when various Mennonite groups initiated mission efforts. Mennonites also formed the Mennonite Central Committee to provide relief for Mennonites in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. This inter-Mennonite relief agency now seeks to relieve suffering and promote economic development in many parts of the world. Nearly half of the world's Mennonites now reside outside Europe and North America and are the product of mission efforts. After the United States (266,100 Mennonites) and Canada (114,400), Zaire (112,906) and India (76,670) have the largest Mennonite populations. Over 320,000 Mennonites reside in Africa and Asia.

The major Mennonite churches in North America today include the following:

The Mennonite Church. Sometimes referred to as the "Old Mennonites," this is the largest Mennonite conference. The Swiss Brethren began emigrating to North America in the early eighteenth century,

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settling first in Pennsylvania, then in Virginia and Ohio. They organized various regional conferences already in the 1700s, but it was not until 1898 that a North American Mennonite Church conference was formed. This group is comprised in almost equal parts of the descendants of Swiss immigrants and the progressive Amish Mennonites. The Mennonite Church was for years somewhat conservative in matters of dress, worship practice, and church discipline.

The General Conference Mennonite Church was organized in 1860 by "progressives" who pushed for reforms ranging from an active missionary program to Sunday Schools to more modern dress. It drew its membership initially from South German immigrants in Iowa and Illinois, as well as some Swiss congregations from Pennsylvania. When the first wave of Mennonites from Russia came to this country in the 1870s, most of them joined the General Conference. Historically, General Conference Mennonites have been the most liberal in accommodating themselves to the manners and customs of the rest of society. Today, however, one would find little difference between the Mennonite Church and the General Conference on these issues.

The Mennonite Brethren Church was born in Russia in 1860. Due, in part, to the influence of a Lutheran pietist preacher named Eduard Wüst, a group of Mennonites became very concerned about the decline in spiritual life in their community, and finally separated themselves from the main body of Russian Mennonites. Many of the Mennonite Brethren left Russia in 1874, although many others stayed behind. Mennonite Brethren have from the outset maintained a somewhat more pietistic, revivalistic stance than their Mennonite Church and General Conference counterparts.

The Amish grew out of a schism among the Swiss Brethren in Alsace in the late seventeenth century. The split centered on issues involving the severity of church discipline, the necessity of demonstrating separation from the world in matters of dress, etc. The group was named after their leader Jacob

Ammann. Amish began emigrating to North America in the eighteenth century. They settled first in Pennsylvania, but some Amish had moved as far west as Kansas by the latter part of the nineteenth century. The religious life of the Amish is very much centered on the individual congregation, the *Gemeinde*. They will accept only those technologies that, in their view, will not fracture the bonds of community. The Amish are currently the fastest-growing Mennonite-related group in North America.

The Hutterites. As indicated above, the Hutterites left Russia in the 1870s, settling in what was then Dakota Territory. Their communitarian lifestyle, coupled with large families, has resulted in unusual prosperity. Unlike the Amish, the Hutterites do not shun technology; in fact, they welcome it. The benefits of that technology, however, are always the property of the community, rather than the individual.

The Church of God in Christ, Mennonite was founded in Wayne County, Ohio, in 1859 by John Holdeman. Holdeman was distressed by the quality of spiritual life among the Mennonites of Wayne County and sought to restore the New Testament church. He placed strong emphasis on nonconformity to the world. Church discipline was to be actively practiced as described in Matthew 18. Holdeman's influence was so great that members of this body are frequently called "Holdeman Mennonites." Though it began in Ohio, the church now has its administrative headquarters in Moundridge, Kansas.

The **Brethren in Christ**, earlier called "River Brethren," arose out of pietistic revivals in the late 1700s in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Most of the founders were Mennonites; they combined elements of Pennsylvania-German revivalism with older Mennonite traditions. In the late 19th century, Wesleyan holiness emphases were added. Until the 1950s, the Brethren in Christ, like some other Mennonite groups, practiced plain dress and other aspects of nonconformity. In recent decades the Brethren in Christ have been close to the evangelical wing of American Protestantism.

II. Directory of Selected Mennonite Historical Libraries and Archives

United States

California.

Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 4824 East Butler, Fresno, CA 93727-5097 (209) 453-2225.

Illinois.

Illinois Mennonite Historical Library and Genealogical Library/Archives, P.O. Box 819, Metamora, Il 61548 (309) 367-2551.

Indiana.

Archives of the Mennonite Church, 1700 South Main St., Goshen, IN 46526 (219) 535-7477.

Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526-9989 (219) 535-7418.

Iowa.

Mennonite Historical Society of Iowa, 710 12th Street, Kalona, IA 52247 (319) 656-3732.

Kansas.

Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Tabor College, Hillsboro, KS 67063 (316) 947-3121.

Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, KS 67117-9989 (316) 284-5304.

Ohio.

Mennonite Historical Library, Bluffton College, Bluffton, OH 45817 (419) 358-3365.

Oregon.

Oregon Mennonite Archives and Library, Western Mennonite School, 9045 Wallace Road, N.W., Salem, OR 97304 (503) 363-2000.

Pennsylvania.

Archives of the Brethren in Christ Church, Messiah College, Grantham, PA 17027 (717) 691-6048.

Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, 2215 Millstream Road, Lancaster, PA 17602-1499 (717) 393-9745.

Mennonite Historians of Eastern Pennsylvania, The Meetinghouse, 565 Yoder, Box 82, Harleysville, PA 19438 (215) 256-3020.

Muddy Creek Farm Library, 376 N. Muddy Creek Rd., Denver, PA 17517 (215) 848-4849.

South Dakota.

Freeman Academy Historical Library, 748 South Main St., Freeman, SD 57209 (605) 925-4237.

Virginia.

Menno Simons Historical Library and Archives, Eastern Mennonite College, Harrisonburg, VA 22801 (703) 432-4170.

Canada

Alberta.

Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, 76 Skyline Cres. NE., Calgary, Alberta T1Y 4V9 (403) 275-6935.

British Columbia.

Mennonite Archival Centre—British Columbia, Columbia Bible College, 2940 Clearbrook Rd., Clearbrook, BC, V2T 2Z8 (604) 853-3358.

Manitoba.

Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 169 Riverton Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba R2L 2E5 (204) 669-6575.

Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba R3P 0M4 (204) 888-6781.

Evangelical Mennonite Conference Archives, Box 1268, Steinbach, Manitoba, R0A 2A0 (204) 326-6401.

Ontario.

Amish Heritage Historical Library, Route 4, Aylmer, Ontario, N5H 2R3.

Mennonite Archives of Ontario, Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 3G6 (519) 885-0220.

Saskatchewan.

Rosthern Junior College Archives, Rosthern Junior College, Rosthern, SK S0K 3R0 (306) 232-4222.

Other

Brazil.

Archives of the Mennonite Brethren Conference in Brazil, Caixa c.p. 2445, 80.001 Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil.

Germany.

Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, D-6719 Weierhof, Post Marnheim, Germany.

Netherlands.

Doopsgezinde Archieven, Gemeentearchief Amsterdam, Amsteldijk 67, 1074 HZ Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Doopsgezinde Bibliotheek, Universiteitsbibliotheek van Amsterdam, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Paraguay.

Archives of the Mennonite Brethren Conference, C.d.c. 1154, Asunción, Paraguay.

Fernheim Colony Archives, Filadelfia, Chaco, C.d.c. 984, Asunción, Paraguay.

Menno Colony Archives, Colonia Menno, C.d.c. 883, Asunción, Paraguay.

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